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ABSTRACT

Social change in the 1960's has created a new climate for literary expression in the coming years. In order to emphasize the change in reading taste, and the corresponding change in writing fiction, the Oregon State Library sponsored a workshop dealing with book selection in this new era. Many communities in Oregon are conservative in their attitude toward appropriateness of materials in public libraries. This heightened the need to bring to the attention of librarians in small communities their role of leadership in cultural affairs and to develop a sense of responsibility to consider the "problem" book. The publication of the report of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography made this an auspicious time to consider the problem. Much has been written on censorship, intellectual freedom and librarians' responsibilities in these matters. Therefore, the emphasis of the workshop was on reading examples of current fiction and discussion of specific works on their merits in relation to the philosophical concepts that were generally known. An attempt was made to bring librarians attitudes toward the contemporary novel out into the open for criticism or justification. (Author)

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THE CLIMATE OF BOOK SELECTION :

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

Proceedings

of a

Workshop

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Sponsored by

Oregon State Library
Eloise Ebert
State Librarian

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INTRODUCTION

Social change in the 1960's has created a new climate for literary expression in the coming years. In order to emphasize the change in reading taste, and the corresponding change in writing fiction, the Oregon State Library sponsored a workshop dealing with book selection in this new era. Many communities in Oregon are conservative in their attitude toward appropriateness of materials in public libraries. This heightened the need to bring to the attention of librarians in small communities their role of leadership in cultural affairs and to develop a sense of responsibility to consider the "problem" book. The publication of the report of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography made this an auspicious time to consider the problem.

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The success of the workshop was due to the contribution of the program participants and the preparation of the workshop attendees. The papers published here are for the use of librarians who were unable to attend the sessions.

ELOISE EBERT
State Librarian

WRITERS AND MORES

by

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This is the fourth time since I came to Oregon in 1962 that I have been asked to speak to a conference of librarians or friends of librarians. I am flattered. I am a life-long English professor currently disguised as an administrator. I do feel a deep professional kinship with librarians and also feel that I have a personal stake in the maintenance of a healthy climate for book selection for the librarian, as well as for teachers.

Prodded, stimulated, restricted, and torn sometimes by complicating forces in the community, librarians select the writers whose books go into our libraries in about the same way that teachers in schools and colleges select the books to be taught in the classroom. We are compatriots, and the assumption here, I suppose, is that a compatriot like me who has survived so long would have some wisdom, or humor, or misery to share which would encourage librarians in selecting books and maintaining libraries.

No one who works with anything as important as books should expect to do so in a social vacuum. We teachers and librarians are caught up in and swept along by confused and changing forces. Once more, our society is taking some great turning, the direction of which can't clearly be seen. Some think we are on the road to ruin. Others think we are headed for greater honesty, justice, humanity, and peace. Within the academic community a struggle is under way between those who see the academy as an open and free market place where everything is to be examined, where judgments are to be suspended, and where diversity and objectivity are to be nurtured and those who see institutions--their classrooms and their libraries--as instruments of direct social action. Some think we should be running little "islands of objectivity" and others think we should be "staging grounds for revolution". The latter group believes that our society's problems are so severe that we can't afford "objectivity" --that it is, in fact, immoral. The academy must be a base from which to strike out against injustice and wrong. Everything must be politicized. Committees and hearing rooms are to be stacked; opposition speakers are to be intimidated. Yet, of course, the people on the far right have always wanted a carefully defined orthodoxy. But in recent years the fanatics on the left have been the most virile opponents of a kind of open free objectivity in the academic community which ten years ago nearly everyone assumed was an unquestionable ideal. It is impossible, I think, to see at this moment the end of this struggle. Its outcome will likely be as far reaching as an earlier struggle over the classical curriculum and specialization.

It is possible, of course, that this struggle did reach a kind of climax last spring and that in a fairly short time--say two years-- we can see clearly just which way we went. Violence, which is the extreme manifestation of the activist position, does seem far less appealing now than it did a year ago. Some very bright young people who were activists last year are off on an intense quest for solutions to human unhappiness in non-Christian Oriental religions. I can validate this with my own eyes and ears. I also observe among some of them a deep and pervasive sadness akin to fear. The mood for several years has been anti-knowledge, anti-science especially, and anti-technology with a passion. The intuitive and the poetic have been in. Last year it was hard acid rock in music; this year the noise level is lower but the quest for unspoken meaning through music goes on. The supposed real world is rejected as alien and non-real by others. I don't think we know where we are just now.

Values are questioned as never before in my lifetime. Sex taboos crumble. Many common agreements once understood and accepted among parent and child, teacher and student, race and race, and the governed and governing, are lost. People are struggling to redefine the terms under which they are willing to live together, and the definition frequently insisted upon by one faction is unacceptable to another.

I think we in the academic community should not exaggerate our own role in all this. People outside our midst seeking simple explanations of what is wrong, explanations that will free them from any blame, and people inside who like to believe that they are important enough to disturb--or save-- society exaggerate the extent to which things like books, music, and teachers cause society's difficulties or find its solutions. Books did not create the drug problem or the generation gap and they did not invent the civil rights movement. A book that comes before society is ready for it goes onto the shelf to be ignored--witness Melville's Moby Dick. Books illuminate the feelings and thoughts that people have as a result of their experiences. Hangups--everybody has one now--are rooted in experience far deeper than any reading we do. People in a torn and confused society like ours may believe that a library, like a school, can be a guardian of threatened values or an instrument for change. The librarian, or the teacher, is expected to be Horatio at the Bridge or destroyer of the establishment.

Thus we are caught among conflicting forces, changing mores, and shifting but deeply felt attitudes about what is proper and improper. There is no way to reconcile the patrons of an art gallery over what is good and bad taste in paintings. What some think is an exciting new technique, satirically corrective of social ills or vital and truthful, others regard as in the worst possible taste, purposefully offensive, and plain filthy. People within our communities can't be reconciled over what should and should not be done in the schools with sex education and how it should be done. What one mother sees as the development of a wholesome attitude

toward our common nature with other animal creatures, another sees as a degrading comparison of people with dogs and pigs and also an unhealthy stimulation of sordid curiosity.

In the face of such conflict, just to do nothing--a tempting solution--won't work. You can't just remove from your shelves everything that offends somebody--everything from Huckleberry Finn to Juicy Lucy. These are the days in which everybody dares to surface and make a demand. We learned long ago that we might have to cope with the Action Committee of the League to Stamp Out Smut in the Library. This was not such a hard thing to do. In fact, the chairman turned out to be a pretty reasonable fellow and was anything but violent. Now we may be faced with the Action Committee of the Society to Defend the Rights of Gay People. Not long ago the person wanting the publications of the Institute for Sex Research or simply wanting to perk himself up with a little pornography came into the library quietly, tried to look and act like everybody else, and hoped he wouldn't find his associate's daughter at the checkout desk. Today the person looking for the illustrated book on abnormal sexual activities which you could have bought, but didn't may confront and otherwise threaten you and link what he calls your conservative attitudes about the value of erotic authors with establishmentarian attitudes about civil rights, interracial sex, justice to the poor, and the Viet Nam War. He will put you on the defensive in ways not employed by the Mothers and Fathers for Decency.

So many diverse people are insisting on their rights and standing on their principles. Being downtrodden is the in thing. Everybody thinks he is a nigger--the student is a nigger, the teacher is a nigger, the woman is a nigger, the transient farm laborer is a nigger, and--if they stopped to think about the new meaning of the term--the employer and the construction worker might call themselves niggers.

It is not always clear who really has principles and who simply feels sorry for himself or is in the grips of so much emotion that it distorts everything he sees, or who is rigid and frightened. It would be useful for more of us to remember that the starting point in any successful human experience cannot really be a set of principles. In the most intimate and meaningful of all human relationships--the family--most of us learn to keep clear the distinction between ideas and persons. Wise people in a family do not allow a clash of ideas--no matter how important--to destroy the relationships among the persons. Perhaps this is because in the family relationship persons are so real and so obviously complex that ideas are seen for what they are-- important abstractions, but still just abstractions. They are alterable secondary things. They don't love or feel pain. They can be defined. People are something else. Ideas, styles, and habits-- mores--aren't the places to start. Every seasoned, effective counselor knows that to be effective he must begin with the complex, mysterious, unexplainable but real human being in front of him, not with a set of principles or ideas or formulae.

Writers and Mores (cont.)

So I think it is with us. We do have standards--principles--but the reality of the society of which we are a part is our starting point. In the face of this reality we may sometimes be tempted to retreat to a simpler, more secure basis, wnich is only an abstraction but is definable. For this society presents us with a painful problem; it is not reconciled with itself. It is in quest of a congruence which it has not found, though it may find it and find it quieter than some old pessimists like me believe it can. It does not know if it is Christian or non-Christian or anti-Christian, religious or secular, militant or pacifist, permissive or authoritarian, patriotic or unpatriotic. The generations, the races, and even the sexes are unreconciled. Until congruence is found we must learn to live with conflict. Even as enormous growth was our chief problem a few years ago--getting enough space to put the books and enough room to put the children--so dealing with conflict will likely be our main problem in the years ahead.

I don't propse to take to the hills, for two good reasons; first, there is no place for me in the hills, and second, I am not that pessimistic. In its stumbling, wasteful, painful, destructive and slow way, our society will find some kind of congruence. Because of the enormous awareness which always characterizes the young, newly emerged from the innocence of childhood they will do a great deal of the leading rather than we "older and wiser heads" with all our experience. We have too much scar tissue along with our precious wisdom. And the creative arts--literature and music especially-- will signal the way the human spirit is going. It is always so.

For the time being we will live with the dirty book problem and all the other problems. The "dirties" will attack us for "repression" and "censorship." The "cleans" will attack us for "lack of standards." There won't be a "common conscience" in any community large enough to have a library. The librarian will be visited by hostile persons threatening to get the Civil Liberties Union after the library because it has a copy of John Stormer's None Dare Call It Treason but doesn't subscribe to the undergound Willamette Bridge . Someone else will demand to know why you don't have Chris Davidson's The Virgin Eater, Richard Amory's Naked on Main Street, and Samuel Cleland's Peep Show. Someone else will demand to know why you do. The person who once slipped in quietly to see if you had the book about the pleasures of child molestation and the mechanics of copulation with dogs will come to the desk and demand ina loud voice where it is and pass a few remarks about libraries supposing to be depositories of all the literature of our times and about the librarian as censor. "On which shelf is the New York Review of Sex? asks a customer. Doesn't the experience in Denmark and the Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography prove that erotica harms nobody--in fact, does us good? What's the matter with this place? Don't tell me that Playboy has no reference value!" Even the danger of a physical attack upon the library must be thought about.

My imagination may have carried me away just a bit on some of this, for I admit--grimly serious though it is--it has its amusing side, and I like to toy with the thought of a societal expectation that libraries stock things like do-it-yourself kits for abortions just because they exist. But

Writers and Mores (cont.)

instead of indulging a fairly natural impulse in me to satirize through exaggeration and fantasy, I get on with the posture I would--and do--take in the face of these times.

First of all, I have no use for the inflexible, cemented position, whether from the young Turk or the law-and-order crowd. Both are punch-'em-in-the-neck positions, and I think that punching people in the neck has limited value. Both are uncreatively defensive. I have little use for the socially irresponsible "outside-forces-go-to-hell," "independent-city-of-the-mind" attitudes which one sometimes bumps into within the academic community. Academic people who hold these views remind me of dogs barking behind the safety of a fence, a safety they would do well not to take for granted as permanent.

We don't need more lines drawn. We need wider circles, for they must be inclusive, not exclusive. This is no time for an assertion of new brands of Calvinism or St. Augustinism which separate the human race into the saved and the damned. Such a doctrine greatly exaggerates both the holiness of the saved and the depravity of the damned. It renders us incapable of self-doubt, which is essential to teachableness, or compromise, which is necessary in a democracy. A little more generosity in interpreting one another's motives is necessary and deserved. Purity is not quite so simple as either the Mothers for Decency or the American Civil Liberties Union keep making it seem to be.

Another thing besides exclusiveness that won't work or at least is entirely too limited, is letting the courts decide about book selection. It is understandable, of course, that in a hostile society characterized by factions which refuse to come to terms with each other, we would increasingly see courts used to decide conflicts over wages, student discipline, live-in requirements for freshmen in residence halls, and scores of other conflicts once settled elsewhere. But it strikes me as unworkable--even cruel to judges--to expect courts to make very useful judgments about socially redeeming features in books for the guidance of librarians. I have nothing but sympathy for a judge who must spend his evening reading a wife-swapping novel to see if it is entirely purulent, but I don't think it is a very useful activity.

And I have little confidence in the research techniques of social science to guide us in the choice of books. The confidence people have in certain supposed data on the effects of books makes me cringe--as, of course, it would also make a competent social scientist cringe. So often, the "research" appears to go about like this: restrictions are taken off "adult" or "art" movies or controls on sale of pornographic books are removed. Then the rates of increase or decrease in sex crimes or divorces in the country or city involved are studied. It is shown that the number of sex crimes or divorces has actually dropped off or hasn't increased as was predicted. The assumption is that something has been proved, which it hasn't. I am reminded of the argument that used to be advanced by some citizens in

Writers and Mores (cont.)

Alaska who didn't want the thriving business of prostitution upset by laws or enforcement of laws because it would upset jobs and profits but who argued that their true concern was the protection of decent women.

Persons who use this sort of specious social sicence research to "prove" the social insignificance or social benefit of pornography may feel justified because the other side has used it to prove that books do make people depraved. But I think we must not use it and, in fact, must point out its speciousness when we get the chance. When a human being commits a sex crime and the police find his bedroom stocked with pornographic books we need to be careful with conclusions about cause and effect. It's too bad, perhaps, that the human race lost socially useful agencies like the Oracles of Delphi to whom a person could go and get an answer when there wasn't an answer. Some of us can't live comfortably with ambiguity. It's no wonder that people turn to Dear Abby and to "science."

Although they will give you some valuable help, literary criticism and literary critics can't give you sure guidance. As for literary critics, there are no "authorities" any more and there cannot be. The day of the book reviewer whose opinions carried such weight that he became a wise dictator will not soon return. Not very long ago the people who counted in our culture subscribed to the Atlantic Monthly and read David Weeks, and that was that. Heroes--great authority figures--aren't coming back, although our need for them certainly dies hard. We will make do with ourselves, because there is no other choice. As W.H. Arden put it:

O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbor
With your crooked heart.

There are principles of literary criticism, which have been validated through centuries of experience and invalidated through centuries of experience. Both kinds offer some guidance, since it is important to know both what has been tested and found useful and what has been tested and found useless. It just isn't true that the primary purpose of literature is to teach morality, but neither can literature escape moral judgments. It is true that when moral judgments are made, tone should be the basis for that judgment, not subject matter. No aspect of human experience by itself is unsuitable for a book. No subject matter is immoral. It is immoral for an artist to lie about his subject matter when he writes a book, as he may be a fraud in his personal life. But the lies come in the way he treats his subject matter, not in the subject he has chosen.

The days of the "new criticism" have passed, but one point they made appears to be permanently true: a book should be judged within its own structure and there alone. What somebody thinks about the life of the author has nothing to do with the value of the book. To clinch their point, the new critics observed how foolish an artist can often be as a man and

yet how profound as an artist. It doesn't mean anything that William Faulkner had a job in a house of prostitution because the pay was steady and because nobody was stirring in the morning and he had it quiet to write. F. Scott Fitzgerald's mixed-up personal life and Hemingway's suicide are interesting but without meaning in determining the value of their books. W. H. Auden's and Jack London's foolish politics and Somerset Maugham's homosexuality have nothing to do with their books. Literary criticism had a very sorry period back in the days when university English faculties were under the spell of Sigmund Freud and students were motivated to read books in order to psychoanalyze the authors, particularly to probe into their fascinating sex lives.

Can a man be foolish in his personal life and wise as an artist? By all means, he can, whether he is a painter, a musician, or a novelist. If he knows the structure and discipline of his art and can subject himself to it he may produce valuable works, whereas in the supermarket, on the highway, or talking off the top of his head in a PTA meeting, he may be just as dumb as the next person--dumber!

A distinction can be drawn between sentiment and sentimentality and a work of art can be judged and rejected as sentimental. Some of the current "sensitivity" stuff is sentimental, and one need not apologize for saying so. "When you can hear the screams of an injured insect you are beginning to be sensitive," says Amy Freeman Lee. And at this point, I say, "Aw, come off it." Saint Francis was bad enough with his projection of human feelings into birds and wolves. This insect bit is too much.

We should treat kindly but ignore the frequent complaint from viewers of modern art and readers of modern books: "There are so many ugly things in life; why don't you paint--or write--something uplifting?" If there were nothing important in life but sheep at moonlight and roses at dawn and if there were no important human emotions other than those aroused by "Indian Love Call" this complaint might stand. But our best artists can't be confined to the subject of pretty young girls who meet handsome well-to-do young men, suffer a few petty misunderstandings, recover from them and marry and live happily ever after.

Much as I might be disturbed by the growth of vice, the loss of the work ethic, the erosion of patriotism, the pervasive expectation of instant gratification of wants, and many other things in our society, I must not expect the writer to shape his materials so that what I think is ugly or wrong looks wrong and so that what I think is nice looks nice. People will make moral judgments about a book, but there must be no requirement that a book advocate "received opinions." Once we come to this we are no different from the shallow Marxist who judges a book by whether it "allies itself with the working class movement in its efforts to throw off the shackles of capitalism and establish state socialism and peoples democracy"--as they put it in their absurd jargon. One might

have thought that this problem was settled with the author of Job, that supurb ancient who looked at life as it was and wrote about it uncontrolled by the theological, moral, and philosophical preconceptions of his time and consequently advanced the human spirit as did Erasmus, Cervantes, and hundreds of other great artists and writers.

But I must not linger on the limited but still helpful dicta of literary criticism.

I have said that you and I must learn to do our work in a torn and divided community, and I have said that our community is the basis from which we begin--the point of reference--the starting position, not any set of principles. Impossible? Well, there is really no alternative. I frequently think about the task before our whole society. Consider the plight we are in over just one matter--the Viet Nam War. In the future the young man who did not participate and is sure of his ethical superiority because he didn't, the young man who did participate and is sure that he is ethically superior for doing his duty, the young man who participated and rebelled while doing it, the person who knows that the home-front critics only prolonged our suffering by encouraging the enemy to keep fighting, and the person who thinks the critics were nobly right--all these persons will have to live together as a part of the same society. Impossible? Well, there is no alternative.

Given the problem, the worst thing I can think of for us to do is prolong hatred and division by pulling our ethics on each other. Of one thing I am quite sure; in a society so torn by generation gaps, credibility gaps, racial gaps, gaps between the rich and poor, gaps between the President and Vice President of the United States and college students, teachers and administrators, etc., the exercise to establish who is guilty and who is innocent isn't very fruitful. We are all guilty and need to lower our voices and do some fresh thinking. We have enough furious people standing on their principles and asserting their ethics.

In being a librarian, or a teacher in these days, I would emulate the Frenchman Montaigne, not the Greek Socrates. Both men lived in societies torn by strife. Both lived through civil war. Both lived among fellow citizens with implacable hatred for each other. Socrates was "right" but he was abrasive and stubborn-stubborn to death. Montaigne was also right and he certainly had principles. But for him life came before ideas, not afterward. A Catholic father, a Jewish mother, and one brother and two sisters who were Protestants probably taught him that life comes first and then convictions, not convictions first. Hence his remarkable capacity to be efficient and composed in an uncomposed age. His society, he concluded, did not need another Socrates to expose men's folly to themselves so as to enrage them and to go to his death for his convictions. It needed sanity, good humored self-examination, inspection of its values and practices in as non-threatening manner as possible.

It needed study, not faith that sends men out to die. It didn't need scolding; it needed some quiet reflection upon what man may be and what is possible, given what man is. And I might note that the great French civilization survived and the great Greek civilization didn't.

What I say is don't be doctrinaire and do be realistic. Make your judgments and don't feel guilty about them. Nobody has an unlimited budget; consequently every librarian will have to make choices. Currently, there is no way of reconciling, for example, those who consider certain four letter words in print as absolutely unacceptable and those who use these words as an act of hostility against a hated "establishment" or as an act of honesty. The verbal aggressions which used to be confined to the water closet are now in the books. You didn't create the dichotomy and it won't go away for some time. Relax as much as your own feelings will allow in the face of the glut of erotica. Live with it as best you can. There is probably a limit to what you yourself can stand of "frontal nudity," sadism, lesbianism, homosexuality, voyeurism, and violence. Go ahead and exclude that part of it which you think is shallow, inaccurate, sentimental, sensational, and merely shocking. The inclusive circle can't include everything. If you don't make the selections, who will? Is anybody better equipped than you to do so, in spite of your limits?

A library is a key institution in any society but especially in a society lacking congruence and in quest of common understandings by which it can live. Serve everybody as much as you can in common sense, and stay out of the cross fire. Don't be without principles, but don't be rigid. You might remember all the ills that have been and are caused by people who have taken inflexible positions. Remember that "anything goes" is just as rigid a position as "nothing goes if it offends somebody." The words inclusive and permissive have meaning only when there is an understanding of limits. In a limitless society, freedom has no meaning.

WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

by

Riva Bresler
Head, Fiction Department
Los Angeles Public Library

Like most of you I was delighted at the symbol on the program of the Art of the Possible-- a hen in her accustomed duty of laying an egg despite the restriction of a pair of pants. Last night I wore a pants suit and today I hope I don't lay an egg!

Anytime you consider book selection from the point of view of fiction there are times when the question arises whether we are not considering it in light of a dead type of literature. We keep seeing a form, but people are not reading fiction. The circulation figures show that nonfiction is on the rise; that other forms of entertainment have taken the place of reading books; that there is nothing very new in techniques in the novel or the short story. We are told all these things by people who obviously don't know what they are talking about.

Because there are few of these things that are as viable as that of the novel, we librarians know that we have many patrons who come in to assure us that they do not read fiction. While they are standing at the mystery shelves making their selection, we have women coming in telling us they are not reading novels because they are so full of sex and they go out with their arms full of Victoria Holt, Mary Stewart and D. E. Stevenson. We have the young people who come in ready for assignments who go out with their eyes aglow when they have discovered an author long dead, but alive to them. We have people who come and see television or movies and then request Tom Jones and The Forsyte Saga; and in my area we have the people who are producing these forms of entertainment, who come constantly to seek new sources for development in other fields.

Certainly also this is a field in which the techniques are constantly changing at the same time people are adhering to the forms that they loved in the past. All sorts of people from all sorts of areas have constantly engrossed themselves in the creation of the novel, from the Civil War general who wrote Ben Hur, through the budding journalist Benito Mussolini who wrote The Cardinal's Mistress, and later came to a bad end; and the Yale classics professor who decided before writing the movie script to cast it in the form of a novel, greatly to his financial benefit. Journalists like Allen Drury and John Gunther, dramatists like William Gaines and Tennessee Williams, poets like James Dickey and Boris Pasternak have all carried through this creative form as a means of expressing themselves in a number of ways. With this constant change and development and interest, our problem is indeed a great one.

How can we decide, practically, what we are going to present to the people who want to read this material? Not only what do we want to present from the current material, but how are we going to keep it--because what we are writing for, we realize, is not only the people of today but the future. We all feel and know that the sudden discovery of the works of Hesse and Tolkein by young people was not due to any influence on the part of the publishers who had long since exhausted their stocks. Names that are little known to the reviewer, like Georgette Heyer, are staples because of their presence on the library shelves. Even the first works of a writer like Mary Stewart were only the beginning of continued interest in a writer who is the favorite of a particular kind of reader today. How can we assess this? How can we decide what is going to be usable and what is going to be delightful? The standards that we have learned in our courses don't always apply. How can we discuss quality in terms of a novel like Don Quixote? How do we discuss character development in considering Robinson Crusoe? Where is the inner depth and emotion in The Three Musketeers, the style in Sister Carrie, or coherence in Moby Dick? And above all, how do we assess that personal spark that comes from the book to the reader when he finds an unknown?

There is no substitute in the world, when selecting a book, for being familiar with the material for reading. This is a luxury unfortunately in the practical basis that is probably confined to the larger libraries, to the libraries that have made contacts with the vendor to receive material on approval until it is published; to the libraries that can make an annual arrangement so as to get Greenaway copies of books from the publisher; even to the libraries that can afford enough of a McNaughton subscription to get books immediately upon publication for assessment.

It also requires, as we know the expenditure of time and devoted volunteers, or even in regualr assignments for people to read, to compare to evaluate for a large library system. And even for an individual it takes a time outside of our usual working hours. I think we are probably accustomed to that right now; we know that we cannot limit our hours to a nine-to-five basis...we can't limit them to any sort of basis. Our work as librarians is constant and we never know when we are going to be called.

It's absolutely important that we familiarize ourselves-if not with the bulk of books, if not with books before they are published or before we acquire them for our library-at least with the field; and once they are in the library, with the sort of works we dislike, the sort of works that we do not understand, the types of literature and of entertainment that are of little interest to us... at least to get a taste of them, at least to understand what there is in them that will appeal to other people. I hate to mention this, but I know of no other weapon as great against the forces of bigotry and censorship as being able to say that one has selected a book on the basis of reading it himself. It won't satisfy the critic but it is a far better answer than citing an unknown authority, no matter how well known he may be, particularly if the critic knows you and knows you are the church-going neighbor rather than the wild person who stays out all night.

In addition to examination of the book, what else can we do...how can we turn to other sources of selection before we get the books into the library? We can no longer rely on the names of publishers to any great extent as we could some years ago, but we still can say that Alfred Knopf book translations are undoubtedly excellent in their field, beautifully produced, and presenting to this country the works of important authors abroad. We can do so for a few of the university presses in the same way...the University of Texas with its beautiful translations of Latin American authors, the University of Wisconsin with its very fine Nordic translations. We can, on the other hand, be sure that Grove Press will usually produce something that would raise eyebrows. But in between, the name of publisher, even the name of an author or editor, gives us very little choice in the field. There are a few areas, a few aids that we possibly can use in advance of publication to direct us to new names as well as old names, and I would like for a little while to go over those that have been helpful, at least for me.

I think that every library benefits by the $16.50 spent for an annual subscription for Publishers Weekly, not only for the ads, and not only for the announcement numbers which actually list in the back so much material that is about to be published, but also now for the weekly forecast which is handled by one or two people so that the assessment is done on more or less the same basis. It is a dispassionate assessment; it covers in general the fiction that is apt to be purchased by a library; it gives an idea of the quality and of the treatment. It reflects at times a bit of personal enthusiasm or dislike, but one is easily apt to see this and consider it in this point of view. It's extremely dispassionate without being void in its treatment of the areas that are sometimes called controversial. Recently there was a review of the novel by the brilliant young English writer Anthony Burgess who is obsessed with words, who has called his new novel MF. This is a euphemism for a term that is usually not mentioned in polite society.. as Publishers Weekly said, MF standsfor, and mentioned the term and that was it.

Probably the best known service which offers material on novels in advance of publication is the Kirkus Book Service which costs a good deal more and which covers a good deal more material. It covers not only fiction, adult nonfiction, as you know, but young adult books and children's books, and varies in cost depending upon the speed of the service, by air-mail or direct mail, and also upon the amount of the service to which one subscribes. I think the full amount by air mail runs about $35 per year. It has the advantage of being extremely thorough, it was started by a publisher's reader who had a great deal of experience in the field and who apparently has made enough contacts with the publishing houses to be able to get routings rapidly. Miss Kirkus is no longer actively associated with the service but Alice Wolff, who was her second in command, has now taken it over. The reviews are unsigned and done by a number of people..

and there are times, I suspect, that they are done by young college women who have had no experience whatsoever in the world of reading, however they feel about the world of books. The assessments vary to a degree that unless one can have an understanding of who the readers are, one is never quite sure about trusting the assessment. The style is fascinating, frequently one understands what the analysis of the book is after having read the book. On the other hand, again, my own experience has been that many people outside the library service and outside the book service field find this a useful tool. Agencies, writers' agencies, stories for television and motion pictures, free-lance writers often have their own subscription toethis service because of the introduction that this gives them to a variety of new books.

In our own field the first example in advance is of course the Library Journal, and having at one time done some reviewing for Library Journal I can say mean things about reviewers. It is for the Library Journal reviewer a labor of love, there is no monetary satisfaction for it... the editors of the periodical are dependent upon people who offer to do the work. There is an assessment by the periodical itself of the reviewer's interest and background, and of course there is an identification with his present library. Outside of this it is purely a written communication which must be taken on fact and it is a two-way sort of thing because the person who is reviewing the book often can have, however, interests of his own... can have little experience with libraries outside his own field... he sometimes has to take another sort of public entirely on faith.

There is another limit also-the space limitations which the magazine must put on the reviewer and which is very deliberately adhered to in the kind of format in which the reviewer must send in his material-it really restricts him. Sometimes this restriction, I think, is evident in the tone of the review. The reviewer feels that he must cram a great deal into a small space and make it lively, and believe me it isn't easy to review books without using the words "this novel" once or twice. Much of the reviewing in Library Journal I think at times tends to be an attempt to make a change purely in vocabulary. On the other hand it is an assessment by people who know to whom they are appealing. And, interestingly enough, it probably considers more material that is not suitable for libraries than anything else I can think of. L. J. is willing to accept anything that the publishers hand it in the way of galley or advance books and the publishers apparently are anxious for mention in the library periodical. It does mean that it clears out for us some of the odd things that we may see reviewed.

And finally there is what I think is an undervalued library publication, and that is the ALA Booklist which is done by paid staff members of the publication who have been screened for their qualifications before they are employed. The material it covers is material that is more or less the thing that is destined for public libraries, but this includes a vast variety

Where Do You Begin? (cont.)

of books and is not aimed at the middle class kind of reader. It sometimes calls attention to material that is not reviewed elsewhere, such as Nordic translations of the University of Wisconsin. It does not neglect the reader who comes in and just wants a good book, but equally it calls attention to the adventurous, to the new, to the material of quality about which libraries should be thinking. The writing is dispassionate, urbane, informative, gives some idea of the quality and the style and keeps personal interpretation to a very minimum. And again I think if one were taking a subscription to anything, the second choice would be the Booklist, which is $12 a year.

For the rest, as far as the selection of fiction goes, the problem of the general review media is always a difficult one because by the time the book is reviewed the patrons are demanding it, but it is the media that calls the attention of a person to a particular book and it behooves a librarian to know why his attitude towards the book agrees with or disagrees with that of the reviewer. As Dr. Rice said last night, we are finding less and less frequently a reviewer, a source of review in the public media, that we can consider in the attitude of book selection. There are probably only two general review periodicals now that can be considered for the variety of fiction that they review, as far as the general reader is concerned, and those are the Saturday Review and New York Times, both of which are so well established that I think we need say little about them. The reviewers of course vary; we know who they are by name and the statement of qualifications. Often their approach to the book is from the point of view of the book, however, and not it's potential reader. These are writers, these are critics, these are students of literature. Their assessment is in these terms a valid one, but their interpretation is sometimes misunderstood by the general reader. Personal enthusiasms, always a wonderful thing, enter into this to sometimes too great an extent.

It is rather interesting to see what is going to happen to the New York Times book review with its change of editors. At the present time there has been a tremendous change in format which rather delights my conservative fellows; on the other hand in the past few months there have been lead reviews on the front page devoted not to vast interpretation of U.S. foreign policy or important books of memoirs but to mystery story writer Ross McDonald and P. G. Wodehouse. The Book World, which is the descendant of the Herald Tribune Review section, in changing its patronage, in changing its format, has become livelier, but from the point of view of fiction selection has become very difficult to use. It is almost entirely devoted these days to nonfiction. The New York Review of Books which arose from the newspaper strike in New York some years ago has taken an independent place in people's reading, a very thoughtful and unique place in thorough consideration of books and actually of points of view and trends, but again in the overall selection of fiction it is a difficult one to use. Its insight and the interpretations cannot be endorsed by people who are concerned with a discriminating readership because it gives possibly a

Where Do You Begin? (cont.)

reflection of certain intellectual points of view that are so extremely necessary if we are to think about changing times.

We now, I am afraid, must gather in the review field all sorts of magazines, the ones we used to think of as magazines of the arts and letters. Harpers and The Atlantic are still maintaining their book sections. On the other hand the news magazines which used to treat book reviews more or less as news items are now devoting more attention to them in depth. Newsweek has signed reviews of its books; Time devotes a great deal of space and I think occasionally a signature to a book review; even Life magazine now has a regular section devoted to book reviews by an individual. The amazing thing is that magazines formerly with a political opinion, like the New Republic and The Nation, again are expanding their description to a magazine of politics and the arts, and doing likewise in their book reviews. The interesting thing about the fiction reviewers in all these is that one never gets a complete unanimity of viewpoints on any one title. No matter how much somebody is enthusiastic about a book, somebody else is going to panic. No matter how much panic there is over a particular popular novel, somewhere in the general national magazines there is going to be somebody who says, "you know this isn't a bad book after all." It makes our work at least more piquant as far as assessing the book goes. At least we can say that of the type of reader who is being this different about the book.

And finally there is, I suppose, the local newspaper which again has its point of view on novels as far as the general reader is concerned. This calls, I am sure, for interpretation on the part of the librarian who has to know his reviewer. In some cases there are still daily newspapers that foster a single reviewer who has some feeling of integrity and thoroughness and who is making enough of a name for himself that he has the leadership. In some cases the book reviewer must rely on what comes to him, and also on his friends. In a way this sometimes means that we get a good deal of log rolling; on the other hand we sometimes have attention called to material that is not particularly of importance in itself but is of local importance. I have to speak about this figuratively; I am in one city in the United States that does not have to worry about the problem of local authors because in Los Angeles, who was a local author? William Faulkner who wrote for the movies? Thomas Mann, who lived a number of years in Los Angeles before moving away? Ray Bradbury, who has spent most of his life in the city and writes about everywhere else in the universe? Jonathan Lambert who writes perceptively about Los Angeles, although born abroad or Jacqueline Susann who writes imperceptively about almost anything? In any other field this can't be ignored, and the question of local history being revived in poorly written books is one that at times I think the library needs to use for the informative purpose, though I hope not the extent where a library needs to demean itself as far as log rolling is concerned.

Because again the field is so great, the demand is so tremendous, the people who come in have been moved in so many ways, we need to associate with them to find their needs and desires. We cannot throw books down for anyone and say, "Here they are, enjoy them." It's fun to find a surprise on the shelf and this has led possibly to the consideration and encouragement of a number of authors who have been ignored in other ways. It is equally important to share our excitement from personal experience with the reader, and possibly that is where we begin.

AVANT GARDE WRITERS (17)

by

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LSD, Marshall McLuhan, revolutions in attitudes...these are some of the things that are affecting our times. The times are appalling in many cases, but somehow we as librarians are supposed to be au courant with every development and somehow match this with a knowledge of our community and a knowledge of literature, and then put this all together in something we are going to call "book selection." In these difficult times it is really more than one can expect of a librarian to keep abreast of every social issue, know all sides of it, try to relate that to his community and just read...read even the most obscure authors and know what it is they are trying to do when they are so frequently, deliberately obscure and just want to confuse the issue. It is therefore important in developing your philosophy of book selection that you have some grasp of making your selection relevant befo. e people start coming to the library.

Recently, on a Saturday, I was doing my shopping and dropped over to a public library and found it crammed with students, with very few middle-aged adults or even adults in their 20's or early 30's. It was filled with high school students. Later on in my shopping trip I went through the Payless Drug Store; they have a long aisle of paperbacks and it was packed with adults, buying books. This has come to be one of our real concerns, the fact that there are all kinds of books available in drug stores and supermarkets and people are turning more and more to this source for their reading. I think this somewhat reflects on libraries and their book selection policies if adults aren't turning to the library for some of this reading material.

As guidelines in book selection there are three approaches that I have used and found very helpful. The first one is to know the times, difficult as that might be. To know the trends and spot the trends I have tried to keep track of the outer limits... what they call the Avant Garde...those people who go out to the "point" and explore the territory before the rest of the pack comes along. It is, after all, the Avant Garde that paved the way in many cases for the pornography. In the introduction to Naked Lunch we see Norman Mailer's comments on this situation. Naked Lunch won the right to be sold openly in book stores and paved the way for more to follow.

Avant Garde Writers (cont.)

The second approach to book selection is to know our community and know it very thoroughly in all its aspects from top to bottom. If you know your community, you know your potential as a librarian--your community can be an institution, a county, or it could be a very small town--but if you really know it, not just the people who come to the library regularly but all those people who never come to the library and never seem to want to, you can do a better job of book selection.

The third approach is to know your literature, and that's the hardest part because busy librarians could possibly spend a lifetime just reading reviews and never get around to reading books.

The experimental novel is certainly not going to pass Marge's first test of universal appeal. This is a novel that librarians will probably have to introduce even to the regular reader. I am not a literary critic of the avant garde and I don't read these authors for a hobby or anything, but I have been attracted to these forms of literature because they seem to reflect in some way where the world is going and to reflect the general disintegration of the novel, if not society.

If you are going to discuss books, the three basic questions for effective discussion are: What did the author say? What did the author mean? and what relevance does this have to me? With these three questions you can easily get some kind of book discussion going. With the second in this series, What did the author mean?, I am really hard pressed to come up with any real answers that would be generally acceptable when dealing with the experimental novel. The experiment in literature is produced by writers who are either definitely involved in various "far out" circles of living, or they have a long time to sit and observe these people play around and record it. Or the fortunate few who are writers-in-residence can just sit and play with words, and from this they can go into all sorts of literary games, play within a closed literary circle and write reviews about each other's books and then assign them to their own students for study.

What you really have to do with these novels is just read them, and we are going to do a lot of reading of extracts in my discussion today. I hope you will forgive me for that but I honestly cannot come up with interpretations of this kind of literature. After I got through with a few reading experiences in the last couple of weeks, forming my opinion and then later going to book reviews, I somehow got mixed up or confused because of the varied interpretations that are possible from a reading of those books.

When I first started working for the State Library,Miss Ebert was well advanced in the planning of this conference and she asked me to do a little report for her on a couple of books. I did a summary and gave it to her and then proceeded a little further after having submitted these and read the New York Times review of it and thought that I had really reported about the wrong book. We had come up with completely varied interpretations. For Ishmael Reed's Yellow Back Radio Broke Down, whatever that means, there was review which summarized this work as symbolic of the devil and the Catholic Church, while it was obvious to me that it was the black revolution and the Establishment.

There are some things which occur regularly in the experimental novel and I would be on fairly safe ground to say that Freud and Psychology in general and the fantasy of the human life are playing a big part in what these kinds of writers are trying to produce. The other aspect is the influence of Marshall McLuhan when he claimed that continuity in a life style is dead, that life doesn't proceed in paragraphs or sentences that are grouped together and developed into a coherent whole. Life is an unorganized experience and sometimes completely unrelated...events are bombarding you from every side, they aren't proceeding regularly, and human life has to somehow put everything into order so that it can make sense in living. This is one of the things authors are exploring too. McLuhan influences writers when he tells people that print is dead, that it is the electronic media that communicates to people. This kind of thinking is influencing these writers and this is going to be an enduring influence in the novel.

To turn to the books at hand I will first talk about Naked Lunch by William Burroughs. Burroughs is quite an interesting person; he has one of the most interesting personal lives of any of the authors on your reading list. Some of you probably know that he was a Harvard graduate in 1936; that he is one of the heirs of the Burroughs Adding Machine family, and I learned last night that he killed his first wife in sort of a drunken party when he put an apple on her head and said "I am William Tell, I'm going to shoot it off", and he took a bow and arrow and missed. He is apparently a homosexual and a heroin addict. Out of all this life he put together a number of books, with probably the one getting the most critical attention being his Naked Lunch. This is a completely disjointed book that describes his experiences in the junkie's world-it is very brutal, very incoherent, frequently unreadable, and I know that many of our colleagues in the State Library were finding it somewhat tiresome.

But I did like what Norman Mailer said in an introduction to the book when he was testifying in a court case after the book had been confiscated by the police. In the case he testified that:

William Burroughs is in my opinion--whatever his conscious intention may be--a religious writer. There is a sense in Naked Lunch of the destruction of soul, which is more intense than any I have encountered in any other modern novel. It is a vision of how mankind would act if man was totally divorced from eternity. What gives this vision a machine-gun-edged clarity is an utter lack of sentimentality. The expression of sentimentality in religious matters comes forth usually as a sort of saccharine piety which revolts any idea of religious sentiment in those who are sensitive, discriminating, or deep of feeling. Burroughs avoids even the possibility of such sentimentality (which would, of course, destroy the value of his work) by attaching a stringent, mordant vocabulary to a series of precise and horrific events, a species of gallows humor which is a defeated man's last pride, the pride that he has, at least, not lost his bitterness. So it is the sort of humor which flourishes in prisons, in the Army, among junkies, race tracks and pool halls, a graffiti of cool, even livid wit, based on bodily functions and the frailties of the body, the slights, humiliations and tortures a body can undergo. It is a wild and deadly humor, as even and implacable as a sales tax; it is the small coin of communication in every one of those worlds. Bitter as alkali, it pickles every serious subject in the caustic of the harshest experience; what is left untouched is as dry and silver as a bone. It is this sort of fine, dry residue which is the emotional substance of Burroughs' work for me.

Just as Hieronymus Bosch set down the most diabolical and blood-curdling details with a delicacy of line and a Puckish humor which left one with a sense of the mansions of horror attendant upon Hell, so, too, does Burroughs leave you with an intimate, detailed vision of what Hell might be like, a Hell which may be waiting as the culmination, the final product, of the scientific revolution. At the end of medicine is dope; at the end of life is death; at the end of man may be the Hell which arrives from the vanities of the mind. Nowhere, as in Naked Lunch's collection of monsters, half-mad geniuses, cripples, mountebanks, criminals, perverts, and putrefying beasts is there such a modern panoply of the vanities of the human will, of the excesses of evil which occur when the idea of personal or intellectual power reigns superior to the compassions of the flesh.

We are richer for that record; and we are more impressive as

> a nation because a publisher can print that record and sell it in an open bookstore, sell it legally.

I think anyone who is shocked at Naked Lunch because it has some passages which seem kind of senseless, which has a great deal of language in it that is "offensive," should remember that what this man is portraying is the hell of drug addiction. If you are really opposed to drug addiction and you are going to be trying to reach some young people, I would recommend that you use Naked Lunch rather than a thoughtful study by a counselor who has been working with drug addiction and had no personal experience, because young people, you know, believe you are going to lie to them about drugs from the beginning, about the whole point of marijuana. The older generation told them that it is going to be all the same, and they know it isn't. So people who have tested drugs know that the older people who condemn drugs are liars. They can believe William Burroughs because he has lived it and he can see it and he can communicate it in very forceful terms which are very, very honest. So here you have a successful book that is very worthwhile reading. So even if you are from a conservative community where you have very active "watch and wards," this kind of literature can be very important; and if you prepare your community for this kind of literature, even though this might have very little appeal in a small town that is not having any of these problems, I think you have done a service for your community by having Naked Lunch. In general, it's not going to be read because it is so obtuse.

With Ishmael Reed you get a little more fun out of life. He is one of the most fanciful of the avant garde writers. He does deal in symbolism, and here again you can get a little bit hung up, and you can amuse yourself as to what he symbolizes. In The Free Lance Pallbearers he is, I think, satirizing Lyndon Johnson and the power establishment in general. The situation here is Sam's Motel. Sam's Motel is occupied by Sam, and Sam is running the whole show, and has been running the whole show for the last thirty years while sitting on the "great commode."

> But SAM's mother taught him everything he knows. "Looka heah, SAM," his mother said before they lifted her into the basket and pulled the sheet over her empty pupils. "It's a cruel, cruel world and you gots to be swift. Your father is a big fat stupid kabalsa who is doin' one to five in Sing Sing for foolin' around with them blasted chickens. That is definitely not what's happening. It it hadn't been for those little pills, I would have gone out of my rat mind a long time ago. I have paid a lot of dues, son, and now I'm gonna pop off. But before

I croak, I want to give you a little advice.

"Always be a the top of the heap. If you can't whup um with your fists, k ck um. If you can't keek um, butt um. If you can't butt um, bite um and if you can't bite um, then gum the mothafukas to death. And one more thing, son," this purple-tongued gypsy said, taking a last swig of sterno and wiping her lips with a ragged sleeve, "Think twice before you speak 'cause the graveyard is full of peoples what talks too much. "

SAM never forgot the advice of this woman whose face looked like five miles of unpaved road. He became top dog in the Harry Sam Motel and master of HIMSELF which he sees through binoculars each day across the bay. Visitors to his sprawling motel whisper of long twisting corridors and passage-ways descending to the very bowels of the earth.

High-pitched screams and cries going up-tempo are heard in the night. Going on until the wee wee hours of the morning when everything is OUT-OF-SIGHT. Going on until dirty-oranged dawn when the bootlegged roosters crow. Helicopters spin above the motel like clattering bugs as they inspect the constant stream of limousines moving to and fro, moving on up to the top of the mountain and discharging judges, generals, the Chiefs of Screws, and Nazarene Bishops. (The Nazarene Bishops are a bunch of drop-dead egalitarians crying into their billfolds, "We must love one another or die.")

You are going to have plenty of opportunity to discuss these novels this afternoon and you can carry it on from there because I don't think there are real meanings in the experimental novel; all I know is that it does have mind expanding qualities. It is going someplace, I don't know where, but if you read and promote it, maybe someone from your community might enjoy it too.

BEATING NOTABLE BOOKS TO THE PUNCH

by

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Every year about this time the expert book selectors make up their lists of best books, and we also have prizes awarded. It is appropriate that we chose this time for our workshop because those two lists that are most familiar to librarians, the Notable Book List and the National Book Awards, have just been announced. And next month we will have the Pulitzer Prizes announced.

Some of the things we want to discuss are: just who are these experts who make up these lists and award the prizes, and how do they decide who is going to get them. Why is it that some of the most commercially successful books, those books that people buy the most and read the most, and those books that are asked for the most in your library, are ones that aren't on the list; and why are some of the books that are on the list so dull or so hard to read or understand... in short, what is it that does make a book a notable book, and how can we determine this before we see it on the list?

First of all, let's talk about the people who decide that a novel is outstanding. Who are they? In the case of Notable Books, there is a committee of twelve individuals and about twenty-four to twenty-eight participating libraries who make up the Notable Books Council of the Adult Services Division of the American Library Association. They're librarians picked by the Adult Services Division president to serve for two years.

The National Book Committee is a non-profit membership organization. Its annual nominations and final awards make another prestigious list of literary prize winners. The winners...one in each of seven different categories... receive a $1,000 prize. The association appoints different judges for each category every year. In the case of fiction they're well-known writers...this year, John Cheever, Marya Mannes, William Styron, and literary reviewers Maurice Dolbier and John Leonard.

For the Pulitzer, anyone can nominate but the selection is made by a jury of well-known names in literature, appointed by Trustees of Columbia University.

There are many other prizes awarded by publishers...and a list of "the year's best" is drawn up by practically every periodical that does any book reviewing at all.

The point is that these lists of "best books, " these "award winners," are chosen by people: writers, critics, college professors, editors, who spend their whole professional lives with books...librarians. The lists are not winners of popularity contests, like the lists of best sellers compiled by book stores (although some librarians suspect that often "best sellers" are the titles of which the booksellers have the largest unsold stock and want to promote).

Do these experts who pick the various award winners agree? Not always...in fact, it might be more true to say "not ever." This year, for example, two of the five fiction books nominated for the National Book Award were not on ALA's list of Notable Books. One was John Updike's Bech, A Book, and the other was Shirley Hazzard's Bay Of Noon.

Did you read the article in the last New York Times Book Review about the National Book Awards? It was called "Our Literary Miss Rheingolds" and criticizes the nominations. It points out the good books that were left out. This kind of article seems to appear regularly in the library periodicals too, after the publication of the Notable Books. Someone is always displeased and writes an article about his displeasure !

But we should also point out that often there is overlap in the prizes. The other prize winners usually are on the Notable Books list... and in 1966 and 1967 the same novels won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Awards. These were the Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter in 1966 and The Fixer in 1967.

Well...how did they decide which were to be the prize winners... which were to be immortalized by being on the Notable Books list?

When I was preparing for this panel I wished there were some kind of magic check list that I could pass out...some kind of "instant evaluator." If we could read a book, for instance, and ask ourselves... "Characters... do their behavior and speech proceed from their character? Yes? O.K. It gets ten points for that. Plot...does the ending follow as a natural consequence of the beginning? Yes? Another ten points. Dialogue? Contrived and artificial. Take off ten points...et cetera. Then, when we finished the list, if it added up to, say, 85 out of 100 points, we would know that we had read a book that was literarily meritorious, a book of "significant contemporary fiction"! But there's no such objective list. Literary merit seems to be more subtle.

There's nothing new or brilliant to say about it. We all took literature courses when we were in college, but just to recall them again... we might want to have them in mind during the rap sessions later on... I'll repeat some of the eternal verities.

Literary merit...it all ends up with matter and method...purpose and presentation...what they say and how they say it.

Let's talk about what they say.

Lasting value and universal appeal...these are two marks of great books, says Henri Peyre, a professor at Yale. He suggests we ask, "Does the charm of this new book, its power over me, wear out? Or do I perceive new complexities, a hidden depth, which had first passed unnoticed? Is its interest due to timeliness or to circumstances which will fail to touch my successors or my children? Has the virtue I discerned in this volume been felt equally by other readers, and is it likely to fire still others in diverse lands, or is it devoid of any widespread or universal appeal?"

The Notable Books committee hopes that permanence will be a mark of the books they choose, but this is not always the case, especially in fiction. On this year's list there are nine books of fiction among the 30 selected. I wouldn't hazard a guess about the permanence of any of them in this age of change. Two, however, are by writers who are already well established, Saul Bellow and Eudora Welty. Mr. Sammler's Planet has received very good reviews, and Mr. Sammler may become a beloved hero for a long time.

Daddy Was a Number Runner is the first novel of a new black writer, Louise Meriwether. It's about a Harlem family, and surely some of its appeal, its notability, is due to its timeliness...to the country's current interest in just this subject...the black family in the city. But will it last? The story is set in 1934...but just by reading the first few pages we know the book wasn't written in 1934! The street language used is the kind we read in books written today. But will its appeal last? Will the stark incidents and the sharp language seem as vivid in future years as they do now?

On our reading lists we labeled one group of books "Outstanding Fiction of Lasting Value." I think when we speak of lasting value as a mark of literary merit it isn't necessary that the novel be another Moby Dick...that it last for centuries or generations. If it can span one generation, I think it passes the test of "lasting value" in this age of change. Even Hemingway and Steinbeck seem passe to some of today's high school students.

Universal Appeal

We think of the traditional themes that deal with the quests and questions to which we all seek answers. Love and hate, good and evil, man and his creator, our weaknesses and strengths, ambition, envy, pride and friendship, courage, loneliness or alienation, endurance are themes of several prize winners in the past few years. Think of Beggar in Jerusalem by Elie Wiesel, Mr. Sammler's Planet by Saul Bellow, Losing Battles by Eudora Welty, and Them by Joyce Carol Oates.

In both Beggar in Jerusalem and Mr. Sammler's Planet the heroes have endured the holocaust, the death and destruction of Jews in World War II, and lived into the world of 1971. In Losing Battles and Them it's endurance of poverty, one in rural Mississippi, one in urban Detroit.

Mr. Sammler's Planet, too, is about loneliness...the loneliness of a man living in cramped quarters in a big city and being talked to more than he likes.

Are these themes still relevant in this age of change?

One critic says, "When we have listened to what Wiesel has to say, other literature seems meaningless. He has written about the central event of our time in which one-third of the Jewish people were killed."

His theme is man's inhumanity to man, and entirely relevant today.

The novel which is pure tract, or in which the author wants to move us to action, is not in fashion as such...the classic tract style, I mean, of Upton Sinclair in The Jungle. Books of this type usually had more "message" than "merit" anyway. But one novel of this type is Slaughterhouse Five by Kurt Vonnegut, an anti-war novel, one that points up war's absurdity.

Now let's talk a little about Technique, or how they say it, or excellence of presentation. This year's nine fiction books might all be considered "conventional" novels except for City Life by Don Barthelme. It's the only one that is experimental in form. Neil is going to talk more about it later. Strong plots, cohesive stories with the traditional beginning, middle and end, are certainly not a characteristic of this year's winners.

Begger in Jerusalem is a series of tales, remembered and told by David the narrator. These are very disjointed chapters with no gripping, cohesive narrative.

In Losing Battles too the plot is negligible. It's a series of reminiscences also, with only a thin thread of action running through it to move it along.

Deliverance by James Dickey is more the traditional type plot, with its gradual build up and strong plot.

Characterization seems to me to be the most appealing thing the novels of this year's list have in common. Mr. Sammler in Saul Bellow's book. His planet is only important because he's in it.

Francie, in Daddy Was a Number Runner, tells her own story, and skinny, ugly Francie is beautiful. One reviewer was reminded of the Francie of a long time ago in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn...remember?

Losing Battles has that whole bunch of kinfolk who are really minor characters...we never really get to know anyone very well...but still we find them likeable as a group.

I don't think we have the anti-hero in any of the novels in the 1970 Notable Books...anti-heroes, those protagonists who are confused, apathetic, frenzied men, or perhaps flabbergasted by the absurdity of the situation in which they find themselves, like Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughter-house Five.

The style...how the author uses words...is another thing we need to think about when we're considering technique.

One of the most poetic use of words is in a translated book, Beggar in Jerusalem. While the style is full of beauty, it's also rather difficult to read. It is interspersed with legend and philosophical speculation. For example, someone asks David, "What do you expect of life?" And the answer is "life itself." And, "Do you know what war is?" "A journey to the end of silence." You can't really skip over that in a hurry. You have to stop and think. I haven't read either In the Highlands Since Time Immemorial or Bay of Noon, but from the reviews I understand the style in both is outstanding. In fact the review I read of Bay of Noon said the style was better than the content.

Why do some lack popular appeal?

A young writer in a literary quarterly, Michael R. French, in Midwest Quarterly, Summer '68, says, "Even if a new kind of novel were reviewed and proclaimed, one wonders if it would sell. The reading public always seems to be several steps behind the writer, slow to understand...even slower to accept...the changes in life which the novelist is quick to perceive and write about. The novelist is often called a prophet, not because he is so prophetic, but because the public is so obtuse. The public, as the cliche goes, is the Establishment, and the Establishment is by definition conservative and self-perpetuating, blind to, if not suspicious of, ideas and values that threaten its welfare." Do you think that is true?

These books are not "merely diversionary." The Notable Books criteria excludes those which are, and we like to be diverted. These are books that you can put down, and often must put down if you're going to get the most from them.

Sometimes we need help from critics and reviewers who are sensitive to art and whose job it is to interpret, clarify, and illuminate.

A recent article in Harper's Magazine points out that ours is an impatient culture, and the slow, reflective engagement that a serious work of art requires is often dismissed as obsolete.

Somerset Maugham says," A novel is to be read with enjoyment." But, enjoyment does not preclude mental work. It is enhanced by it.

It's important that we make this mental effort on behalf of fiction, and that we promote it among our readers. Fiction sometimes seems to take a secondary place in libraries. It's thought to be more worthy to read nonfiction. Yet fiction speaks to us about serious problems on a level that is one of feeling, and it thus expands our understanding of these problems in a way that is not merely intellectual. Through fiction we can gain understanding that's more in the nature of empathy.

For example, one of our foremost contemporary problems is that of public welfare. Every week in newspapers and news magazines we can read an article or essay on some aspect of it. We've read, for example, about the dehumanizing effect of it, the loss of human dignity that must be suffered. But how much more can we feel it, and thus understand it, when we see Francie's mother in Daddy Was a Number Runner go down to the Relief office to sign up. We know Francie's mother and we can feel it when she comes home whipping herself with the thick end of the strap.

We've all read too about the self-perpetuating nature of poverty, how it seems to progress from generation to generation. We can understand this in a theoretical way; but in the novel Them, we know people who are caught in this trap of lack of education and lack of hope. The empathy we feel for them can be transferred to real people in our world today.

Perhaps, then, this is one possibility for fiction in an age of change.

TWO SIDES OF THE COIN

by

Vernice Olson, Head
Popular Library Department
Library Association of Portland

Initially the idea of reducing the art of fiction selection for public libraries to "Two sides of the coin" seemed impossible. I thought it would be necessary to compare my remarks to the loose change in your pocket that with use loses its sharp edges and becomes rounded.

But the reading, thinking and talking about my subject did produce two distinct lines of thought that are important to our discussion. One is Choice...the other Change. Choice is what we make every time we select a book for our libraries. Change is the climate in which we make that selection.

CHOICE.

The only statistics that have importance at this point are output reports. In 1970 there were 1,338 new fiction titles, 79 new editions of fiction titles. The total figure was much higher, but the paperback count was deducted for this report-at an average retail cost now reaching almost $6.00 (A side caution here on statistics. I've seen that 1970 cost figure quoted at $6.27 and also $5.51 in the last few weeks.)

All of the figures establish a basic truth for all libraries represented here. We must establish a policy of book selection and make choices.

Many of the basic principles of choice are familiar to all of you. As a starting point I want to quote directly from Dr. LeRoy Merritt's book Book Selection and Intellectual Freedom: "Two theories of public library book selection are almost as diametrically opposed to each other as the two poles. They may be designated as the value theory and the demand theory. In short, 'give them what they should have' or 'give them what they want.' No man can live for long at either pole nor at the equator, so each librarian works out some sort of temperate compromise."

What do we choose?

There is a basic collection of classic titles that the readers should reasonably expect to find in any public library. The larger the library the larger the basic list. So an easy safe start is to be sure that we have that base. It should be a part of the buying plan each year.

Then look at that 1,338 new title figure for last year and subdivide it into the varied types of fiction included. There will be some first novelists and some writers with established literary reputations. Some experimental writing that is good, possibly trend setting, and some very trite writing. There will be special types such as translations, historical novels, biographical novels, business novels, novels dealing with social problems, short stories, mysteries, westerns, science fiction, adventure or sea stories, character studies, family stories--you name it. We will have readership for all kinds and we must establish a policy of selection.

How do we choose?

In selecting fiction the library can set no arbitrary single standard of literary quality. Quality for an experimental novel will differ from that for a detective story. And remember, we are attempting to satisfy a public varying greatly in education, interest, taste and reading skill. (Quoting Dr. Merritt again, "Under these circumstances fiction selection does not mean choosing only the most distinguished novels but also the most competent, pleasing and successful books in all important categories of fiction writing.")

What are the problems?

So far it sounds easy and book selection is not uniformly difficult, but there are always problems.

(a) Book knowledge- How do you know if it is a good book for your library? Miss Bresler has given you an excellent starting point. Based on all the reviews we can assemble, Portland still orders a large percentage of its fiction on approval and gets a local librarian's opinion.

(b) Experimental novels - Both difficult to assess and for the general public hard to accept. They bring change and innovation and the general middle-class reader does not like change. The major interests among these writers today are characters and ideas. They must be judged on how successful they are in achieving their purpose.

(c) Demand factor- How much demand is demand? Does the library just listen to vocal readers? Or does it seek out the reader who quietly checks the shelves or catalog, list in hand? What is its source? A T. V. talk show or a review in the New York Times Book Review section? Extensive publicity campaigns a la Jacqueline Susann? Two weeks ago Liz Carpenter had an article in the Sunday Magazine Section of the Oregonian about her personal

campaign to sell Ruffles and Flourishes, her book about the Johnson years in Washington. She named T.V. talk shows as the best advertising. Does that listener have any idea about the quality of the book?

One true story illustrates the need to find a balance between using demand as a criteria for choice and other valid selection aids. Our library has a request form that borrowers may use for purchase suggestions. We recently received one for a title that had a very favorable review in the Saturday Review. Although other reviews suggested that if one must handle the book it should be held as far away as possible, we decided to order the book on approval to read and decide for ourselves. The machinery was too slow for our reader and he bought the book for himself. Before we had received our reading copy he called to stop the request. The book was so bad that he did not want his name attached to any recommendation.

This seems an excellent place to emphasize that you need to have established a thoughtful buying standard. To make it clear in your own mind, to make it possible for your board to know and approve what you are trying to do, to help explain to your public, it should be a written book selection policy. Now may I quote the Enoch Pratt Public Library in Baltimore on "demand." "Novels, even though widely advertised, are purchased only if they measure up to the Library's rather broad standards of literary quality. A book in which the plot is trite, the characters stereotyped, or the writing dull or trivial is apt to be turned down even though it is requested by readers."

(d) Quantity - This is a problem in any size collection. How many borrowers can you satisfy when the peak demand hits? Eric Moon calls this "satisfaction point." How much good is having the title if you cannot supply it even on demand? As much emphasis must be given to quantity as to quality.

(e) Awareness of trends - Difficult - but watch magazine articles and book related ads. A British Bookseller ad for Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility to tie up with the important new BBC television serial. Did you have the call for Galsworthy's Forsyte Saga last year as we did? for The Early Churchills now .., better check stock... or an article entitled "The Decline of Flower Power"? What next? Watch for trends... it is probably coming to the front now in some landmark novel that we may not have recognized. Is there a real trend, created by the vast technological advances and general world problems, to call a halt for a while so we can learn to live with now? Five songs chosen for Academy Awards were all romantic. Will the good writing as well as the pulp go that way?

CHANGE.

The second side of the coin is change. You may wonder why I left controversial titles out of my list of "choice" problems. If you will shrug your shoulders and remember that almost any book may be offensive in some way to somebody, we can narrow the controversial to those books that seem to test the outside limits of community acceptability at the time of writing. And this is what change is all about.

Viewed historically, what is acceptable has gone full circle and won or lost battles by eras. Certainly the early English writing of Chaucer and Thomas Deloney, usually classed as bawdy, did not have the hang-up on four-letter Anglo-Saxon words or sex as we hear today. That came to us with the Puritan ethic of a later time.

The American Colonies - particularly the Massachusetts Bay Colony - were extreme examples of censorial theocracy. The lives as well as the writing were censored. Quaker books were burned and possession was fined at the rate of 10 pounds per book.

Not much fiction in that era - it didn't have a place. In 1744 Ben Franklin published the first American edition of Pamela. The year 1789 is the date given for the first American novel and it was not until the decade 1840-49 that 765 novels were published.

Many subjects have had turns at some kind of censorship. A polite plea for women's rights (in 1890) stirred up considerable opposition. In the 1890's and early 1900's the new Puritans appeared in the form of a Watch and Ward Society in Boston and Mr. Anthony Comstock in New York who inveigled Congress into passing the first general law on obscenity. Their first successes were through the courts but later shifted to police suppression.

General changes in United States life have created the changes in reading tastes. In earlier eras such additions as electric lights, and telephones can be listed. Women primarily changed the fashions on sex and decency in print when they left the kitchen to enter offices and factories and shed some petticoats to ride bicycles. They even went to college. More recently increased leisure time, education and vast technical gains and a general permissiveness in life styles show in publishing.

After 1900 the hero of a novel, in proposing to the heroine, sometimes kissed her mouth instead of her hand and even asked her to marry him before he had spoken to her father.

The transition from reticence to realism came very slowly and became apparent after World War I - suggesting the frank speech of the doughboy had something to do with it.

Today American adults have the legal right to read almost anything. This shift has taken place since the 1920's.

Controversial writing should be part of any public library's collection. Too frequently, change accepted, they become landmark books - classics, basic to the collection.

Let me illustrate:

One subject that always served to bring strict censure was any questioning of the established marriage code. Thomas Hardy's Tess, Jude the Obscure, and The Mayor of Casterbridge received excellent critical reviews but were banished for introducing the subject of divorce. Theodore Dreiser intoduced the affair, the seamier side of factory towns. Same story.

Elmer Gantry - banned in Boston. There was no doubt that the book's critical attitude toward orthodox Christianity had much to do with the order.

Ulysses was difficult to obtain until the famous landmark decision of Judge Woolsey in 1931. He discarded the isolated passage idea of obscenity and declared that a book should be tested by its effect as a whole on a person with average sex instincts.

Several years ago we cleared a section of closed stack fiction. All were written in the 1930's and all had one controversial theme for that era - a favorable picture of labor unions.

1966 - The Roman Catholic Church Index of Prohibited Books was dropped officially and what Catholics should read left to their individual consciences.

There are too many to mention all. Some names appear again and again: James Farrell, Henry Miller, John O'Hara, Erskine Caldwell, D. H. Lawrence. Or some titles: Huckleberry Finn, Brave New World, Good Earth, Grapes of Wrath, The Well of Loneliness, Catcher in the Rye, and Lolita. Some battles were fought in the courts, some by police suppression. Time and again the books were banned in book stores and only available in libraries.

You will recognize most of the titles, your library or your school district may still have flurries of dissent about them. Each in its day represented "controversial" and was important enough for public library purchase.

My closing illustration is a school, not a public library story, but it tells something about current change. My quote is from a school book buying list:

> "The four-letter words that are interspersed in this rough, tough story of life in the mining country of Kentucky belong there."
> Burke - To the Bright and Shining Sun.

"Rap Sessions" - Discussion Leaders:

Carol Alderson
Ashland Public Library

Helen Howard
Eugene Public Library

Pearl Kosta
Woodburn Public Library

Ida McClendon
Hollywood Branch
Library Association of Portland

Florence Moberly
Josephine County Library

Gary Strong
Lake Oswego Public Library

Summary Session

Riva Bresler, Moderator

Richard Tuffli
Deschutes County Library

Kay Salmon
Corvallis Public Library

Carol Hildebrand
The Dalles - Wasco County Library